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CONTACT: Brenda Jones
202-226-4673

Statement of Rep. John Lewis at Marriage Amendment News Conference

I am delighted to be here today because we cannot stand by and let the seeds of division to take root in our country again. We have an obligation as American citizens to speak up and speak out.

We made a mistake once as a nation, when we used the Constitution to exclude African Americans from full participation in the democratic process. That one act allowed the forces of separation, hatred, and brutality to run rampant in this country. It cost this nation millions of lives during the TransAtlantic Slave trade, the Civil War, and the decades of overt segregation and racial discrimination.

A bitter history has taught us a great lesson, that regardless of our own personal values, we as a nation will pay a heavy price if we do not respect the dignity and the worth of every individual.

As a participant in the Civil Rights Movement, I confronted police dogs, bull whips, and fire hoses. I was arrested and jailed over 40 times because of discriminatory practices that were made the law in this country. We must not write discrimination into the Constitution. And we must not allow politicians to sow the seeds of division among us when they are campaigning for office.

I don't think there is any Christian, any bishop, any minister, any priest who would not say that the overriding message of the Great Teacher and of the Bible is love. And all the faithful followers of all the great religions of the world would agree that love is the answer.

(more)

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would say we must learn to live together as brothers and sisters or perish as fools. We don't all have to agree, but we must meet diversity with understanding, we must meet division with unity, we must build and not tear down, we must love and not hate.

We are all people of faith. And we firmly believe that we are one people, one nation, one family. We believe that it is not right, it is not fair, and it is not just to sit in judgment of any person simply because of their race, class, gender, or sexual orientation.

We also believe that the Constitution is a sacred document. We have learned from the legacy of division and discrimination, and some of us have been prepared to sacrifice our lives to abolish discrimination in the American legal system. We cannot and will not stand by silently and see division written into the Constitution again.

I appeal to people of faith across America. Let us stand together and not allow anyone—the President or anyone else—to divide us. We must not be distracted from the real issues of the day—the human cost of a misguided war in Iraq, the price of gasoline at the pump and the ties this Administration has to big oil, or the failure of Medicare prescription drug program to protect the elderly.

Let us find a way to reason together. Let us find a way to work together to build an all-inclusive society that has enough room for all of us, a society that is free of discrimination and free of intolerance. Thank you

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